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SUBJECT: HHS SECRETARY LEAVITT DISCUSSES PRODUCT SAFETY AND VISITS  
USS BOXER BENEFICIARIES

[1](#)1. (U) SUMMARY. During a June 24-25 visit to San Salvador, El Salvador Health and Human Services Secretary Michael O. Leavitt hosted a Central American Product-Safety Forum, met bilaterally with President Saca, and visited a clinic to follow-up on the recent humanitarian mission of the USS Boxer. Secretary Leavitt proposed the negotiation of a United States-Central American Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on product safety that would promote capacity-building, the use of common standards, and certification for food and medical products exported to the U.S. market. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) Joining HHS Secretary Leavitt at the June 24, Central American Product Safety Forum in San Salvador were the Ministers of Health from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala; senior representatives of the Ministries of Health from Costa Rica and Panama; Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) officials; other Central American Government functionaries; non-governmental organizations; and U.S. and Central American private-sector industry representatives. Approximately 120 people attended the Forum. President Saca and Secretary Leavitt opened the event, and the Salvadoran Ministers of Economy and Agriculture, along with the Canadian Ambassador to El Salvador, attended the opening session.

[1](#)3. (U) The Forum's initial working sessions, "Fruit and Vegetables: Safeguarding the 'Central American' Brand" and "Minimally Processed Food: How the Private Sector Works Together to Preserve Quality and Safety," focused on food safety, primarily how to use common standards and certification procedures to prevent outbreaks of diseases like salmonella in fruits and vegetables. Industry representatives from the U.S. and Central America cited the cases of spinach (2007), melons and tomatoes (2008) and the need for traceability throughout the supply chain and cooperation with Government regulators. Honduran participants and others noted their concerns that one incident of an unsafe food or product could taint the image of an entire industry or an entire country's products.

[1](#)4. (U) The second panel on minimally processed food and the private sector discussed the shrimp industry, which has already begun the process of establishing internal standards. Discussions centered on how these standards could be certified more broadly.

[1](#)5. (U) Between the morning and afternoon presentations, Secretary Leavitt reviewed the President's Action Plan on Import Safety and proposed negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on product safety between the United States, Panama, and the signatories of the United States-Central America-Dominican Republic (CAFTA-DR) Free-Trade Agreement, to promote capacity-building, the use of common standards, and certification for food and medical products.

¶16. (U) The third session, "Consumer and Medical Products: Protecting Central America by Improving Standards," dealt with standards for ensuring the quality of active ingredients for medical products, including site inspection and supply-chain management. The final panel, "Maintaining Stakeholder Confidence and Brand Integrity through Independent Certification," addressed standards and certification broadly, including third-party certification systems and a discussion of the various international standard-setting bodies available to do work in Central America, like the American National Standards Institute (ANSI).

¶17. (U) Secretary Leavitt asked the audience for recommendations for the proposed MOU, which he would like to have ready for signature by the September PAHO Council meeting in Washington. Participants suggested limiting the scope, identifying an achievable yet meaningful goal, and creating an adaptable framework. Industry suggested focusing on two sectors: shrimp and melons, and Government officials requested training on the inspection of medical products. HHS offered to prepare a draft text of an MOU by the end of July, and then consult with the Governments of the other countries. The Honduran Minister of Health, as head of the Central American Health Ministers' Council (COMISCA) for the second half of 2008, agreed to coordinate the negotiation of the text on behalf of the Central Americans. The Central American Governments asked to invite the Government of Belize to participate in the negotiations if it desires to do so, even though it does not have a free-trade agreement with the United States, because it is a member of the Central American Integration System. (Note: HHS will be convening other relevant U.S. Government Departments and agencies in Washington to consult on the text, as well as the U.S. Embassies in the countries involved. End Note.)

¶18. (U) Both in his private meeting with Secretary Leavitt and in his public remarks, President Saca called for Customs and Border

Protection from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to open operations at Salvadoran ports. Central American participants enthusiastically supported expedited U.S. Customs processing. Secretary Leavitt said he would take the request to DHS. The Secretary expressed interest in establishing an HHS Food and Drug Administration presence in Central America, a goal he said he intended to pursue before the end of calendar year 2008. (NOTE: El Salvador has repeatedly requested a presence similar to what DHS provides at Puerto Cortes in Honduras under the Container Security Initiative (CSI). However, there is an insufficient volume of container traffic in Acajutla to support a CSI program, and construction of the port at La Union is not yet complete. END NOTE.)

¶19. (U) Saca was supportive of product safety, noting, "If we want to play in the Big Leagues, we have to aspire to quality." However, he warned that the Governments involved had to handle the issue at the technical level, so as to avoid a political debate over certification that could have negative repercussions for the United States.

¶10. (U) On June 25, 2008, Secretary Leavitt and his delegation, including HHS Assistant Secretary of Health Joxel Garcia, head of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS), visited a clinic in Acajutla to assess the visit of the USS Boxer several weeks earlier. HHS/USPHS personnel were part of the ship's 1,500-member crew. The Secretary spent time with local physicians, nurses and community health workers who had trained and practiced with members of the USS Boxer team, and then met with patients who had undergone surgery aboard the ship. The Salvadorans expressed their appreciation for the USS Boxer visit and the medical training and treatment they received.

¶11. (U) Secretary Leavitt's visit received national coverage by print and electronic media. Also commanding a lot of press attention was President Saca's call for a U.S. Customs presence in El Salvador.

¶12. (U) Secretary Leavitt's staff has cleared this message.